

Esther Greenwood's Panopticon

Female Identity Through Self-Policing

In

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Chapter One: Women and Mental Illness in an Era of National Security.....	6
Introduction.....	6
The Rosenberg Case: Historical Background.....	6
Death and Rebirth through ECT.....	19
Policing the Woman Initiates Mental Illness.....	26
Concluding Remarks.....	39
Chapter Two: The Female Catch-22 During the 1950's.....	41
Introduction.....	41
The Feminine Mystique.....	41
Fashioning Femininity through the Male Gaze.....	44
Heterosexuality and Repressive Sexuality.....	53
Concluding Remarks.....	64
Conclusion.....	65
Bibliography.....	69

Introduction

I have chosen Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as my primary source, as it presents a thriving period in American history with regards to female gender identity and consumer identity, equally as it implies how the politics of containment during the Eisenhower years lead to an ideology of repression and thus impinged on women's bodies and health. I selected *The Bell Jar* with the intention of arguing how this threefold narration is to be found in the novel. My emphasis in the thesis will be to show how Esther encompasses these aspects of the fifties, with a particular focus on Esther's psychological health, femininity and sexuality. I will base my findings on the images and language in *The Bell Jar*.

I also pursue my inquiry in the context of feminist theories and criticisms. In particular, I aspire to bring into play Michel Foucault's theory on self-policing through the imaginary construction of the Panopticon, a "prison" in which the prisoner will act in certain ways, as a result of not knowing if his jailer can see him or not. According to Foucault, the Panopticon represents all levels and different types of societies; the school, the army, and the asylums. I will make use of his theory to examine how Esther Greenwood's female identity and performances are restricted and shaped by the Cold War era as a kind of Panopticon, presented through McCarthyism and referred to by Esther in the novel's introduction by the Rosenberg's execution. In addition, I will cite prominent feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane to bring the discussion of self-policing further through their ideas regarding "the male gaze". Although offering divergent arguments, both argue that the female throughout history has been treated as an object, whereas the man, the bearer of the look, is considered the position of the subject. How does Esther counter this statement? Core questions which I seek to reveal throughout my thesis will be linked to Foucault's theory of

disciplinary power, and will thus produce questions such as: How does Esther Greenwood accommodate the gender roles of the fifties with regards to its contradictions on the subject of sexuality and gender roles? To respond to the foregoing question I will include some observations from Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". The former questions the "repressive hypothesis", while the latter argues how the society pursue a violent politic through "male right of physical, economical, and emotional access" (Rich, 2003: 26).

Several previous scholars have studied *The Bell Jar* exhaustively in feminist and psychological terms, examining the novel in view of: feminist discourses, mental illness, the female body and patriarchy, as well as Esther's experience of the Red Scare menace. Especially writers such as Jacqueline Rose, Pat Macpherson and Linda Wagner-Martin have contributed useful insights that I use in my thesis and to discuss the aforementioned themes. Nevertheless, hardly any of the scholarly articles and books I have located on *The Bell Jar* have touched upon the relationship between Esther's diminished health and freedom of behaviour, which I argue in my thesis is caused by the domestic values of the fifties, fear of Communism and "the enemy within" in connection with Foucault's theory on the Panopticon and the self-policing society. Yet, Elaine Tyler May and Deborah Nelson reveal that the culture of the fifties displayed contradictory views on certain issues concerning ideas about "citizen and state, self and society", which led to the politics of containment (further elucidated in Chapter One). Nelson discusses in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* in which ways privacy trapped woman in particular. While the term privacy presumably indicated self-sufficiency, it came to symbolize "isolation, loneliness, domination and routine" for many confessional writers, linking Sylvia Plath as a confessional writer to the Foucauldian hypothesis, and arguing that confession does not lead to freedom, as the private

is already penetrated by power (Nelson, 2002: xiii). Carol Warren's *Madwives* explores female hospitalization in the 1950's. By re-evaluating interviews and case records of women diagnosed as schizophrenic, she stresses how the process of gender and marital relationships affected these dynamics, and reveals the social and historical tracks in which some women become madwives. By comparing a quantity of her research with Esther's mental retreat and medical treatment, one seeks answers to the underlining causes of Esther's mental illness.

My thesis asserts that Esther Greenwood's female identity parallels the theoretical approach of the disciplinary power by performing self-policing on two levels: First, as a result of the witch-hunt for communists, prompted and visualised through the image of McCarthyism and the execution of the Rosenbergs, which in turn lead to a society of paranoia; secondly, through Esther's relationship to men, where navigating the male gaze and accomplishing the act of seduction, becomes the ultimate test of Esther's femininity as well as sexuality, and thus leads to her constantly observe herself.

My thesis is organised in two chapters. The first chapter discusses the relationship between women and mental illness. It emphasises that the Cold War's rhetoric and America's quest for national security created a kind of fear that also affected and formed the female identity in the fifties. The chapter's subsections seek answers to three questions in particular: Were there any parallels in the lives of Esther Greenwood and Ethel Rosenberg? In what ways does the practice of electric shock therapy relate to Esther's rebirth? And, to what extent does Esther's self-policing instigate her mental illness? My second chapter discusses the relationship between Esther's feminine, sexual and heterosexual accomplishments in *The Bell Jar*. The chapter in particular raises questions concerning Esther's ability to adapt to 1950's customs of femininity. Through its three subsections I address the following questions: How is Esther

criticising the relationship between the commodity and femininity? Secondly, in what ways does Plath challenge male power in the act of writing? And ultimately, to what extent is Foucault's premise arguing that there is a relationship between sexuality, power and discourse operative in Esther's relationship to men?

CHAPTER ONE

Women and mental illness in an era of national security

1.1 Introduction

The Bell Jar is set in a time of immense cultural and social anxieties, arguably caused by the American political landscape of the fifties. Conformity was a central aspect and the expected norm to pursue. In *The Bell Jar*, the reader is introduced to the alienated Esther Greenwood, a young woman who is coming of age, struggling to find her position in a society marked by its political and sexual restrictions. The Red Scare lurks as a background image, and this is most evident in the opening passage of the novel with its reference to the electrocution of the Rosenbergs. This image represents a small but nevertheless imperative image in *The Bell Jar*, as it brings us to draw parallels to Esther's later breakdown and electroshock treatment. My chief aim for this chapter is to explore in what ways post-war policy, with its core attention on American national security and interests, formed the societal anxiety and the female gender identity during the fifties. I will argue that the social contract between the citizen and the state during the Cold War era was closely connected to the relationship between national security and mental health. Furthermore, I will argue that the fear of Communism led to the establishment of a self-imposed surveillance system between the government and the individual citizen. In turn, the power of the surveillance system in combination with repressive attitudes affected and formed female identity. I will analyze how these aspects are brought to life through the main protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, and how these features are linked to her mental illness.

1.2 The Rosenberg Case: Historical Background

In the summer of 1950, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested and accused of being Soviet

espionage agents, supposedly having committed “atomic spying”. Three years later, in June 1953, the couple were electrocuted for treason. They became the ultimate symbols and victims of the Red Scare (Schrecker, 1995: 127). Whether they provided the Soviet Union with atomic secrets, or whether they were exploited by an American government fervently trying to promote its conspiracy politics to gain supporters, most citizens considered their execution to be a fulfilment of justice (ibid).

The head of this witch-hunt era was J. Edgar Hoover, the Director of the FBI. Although not acting alone, he was undeniably one of the most prominent leaders of the anti-Communist crusade. Yet, he was still dependent on militant anti-Communist networks which had been actively opposing the Communist party for years. In the heat of the post-war era, with a growing ideological gap between the Soviet Union and the US, and with the fact that American Communists supported the Soviets, and provided them with some sensitive governmental information, the anti-Communist agenda became easy to promote. The anti-Communist movement explicitly announced that subversion, espionage or sabotage was the ultimate threat to domestic peace (ibid: 128). Hoover and his companions had access to and influenced both local and state levels of government, and therefore used these outlets to criminalize Communists (ibid). The Rosenberg case and later convictions were used to confirm the Communist threat. Furthermore, Hoover’s frequently exercised slogan that “any member of the Communist Party is an active or potential Soviet espionage agent”, indubitably influenced American citizens’ opinion upon the Rosenbergs’ guilt. The most horrifying aspect of the Rosenbergs, and their greatest threat upon the American community were their normalcy; they seemed to be invisibly infiltrating the workforce of everyday life (Rose, 1991: 196).

Historians have been fascinated by the character of Ethel Rosenberg. In a number of ways she became the female image of the paranoia the Cold War created, as her image touched upon themes such as feminism and civil rights. In her youth she regarded herself as a modern and educated all-American female, despite her Jewish ethnicity. In her adult years she increasingly devoted time to radical causes, but at the same time, she put great effort into nurturing her two sons, and expressed confidence in the science of childrearing (Antler, 1995: 203). When Ethel Rosenberg was first arrested, the authorities' chief aim in doing so was to make her squeal on her husband. During her arrest and trial, the judiciary attempted to break down her credibility. When they didn't succeed, they were convinced that she must have taken part in the spy ring herself. The lawyers argued this by the fact that she was three years older than her husband and therefore the psychologically superior partner in their relationship, and based on these implausible assumptions she must have been the brain behind their espionage. Her denial of participation and the fact that she pleaded the Fifth Amendment made her appear, according to one scholar, as a "cold, well-composed woman, lacking normal feminine characteristics" (ibid: 206).

Even though Hoover at first had not been in favour of the execution of Ethel, who would be leaving two children behind with no parents, he changed his mind when the FBI files revealed that she was "a bad mother after all" (ibid). Eisenhower used the same kind of gender-based logic when he presented his opinion in a letter to his son, John "...it is the woman who is the strong and recalcitrant character, the man who is the weak one" (ibid). Rebecca L. Walkowitz portrays Ethel's dilemma in the following words: "Attorneys cast Ethel Rosenberg as a contradiction in terms, since motherhood was presumed to be outside or above politics whereas activism was most engaged in it. This contradiction was incompatible with conventional femininity and with the sympathy owed to 'proper' victims" (1995: 5).

Nevertheless, for a small group of female radicals Ethel Rosenberg was viewed as a heroine, looked upon for her courage, the vigour of her testimonies and her disobedience (Antler, 1995: 198). Especially the Emma Luzanes Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs supported and admired her appearance on trial. The association interpreted her reluctance to speak not as representative of an impenetrable and callous character, but as an ethical opposition (ibid: 208). They regarded her as a loyalist, fighting the battle for social justice and democracy, certain of her right as an American citizen, eager to confront the system (ibid).

Already in the opening passage of *The Bell Jar*, time and place are set: "It was a queer and sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about electrocutions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick" (BJ, 1). Through these very first lines, Plath offers the reader insight upon Esther Greenwood's condition and persona. She feels lost and alienated in the environment of New York, and she presents her apprehension on the electrocution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. These initial lines of the novel tell us very much about what will come about later in the novel. By linking herself with the Rosenbergs, Esther depicts herself as a victim, unable to function in society. In Marie Ashe's article "The Bell Jar and the Ghost of Ethel Rosenberg", she stresses the novel's involvement with the life and death of Ethel Rosenberg (1995: 215). According to her research, Ethel Rosenberg's birth name was Ethel Greenglass. Did this influence Plath's naming of her main protagonist Esther Greenwood, or is it merely incidental? At this juncture I would like to argue the former. Ashe argues that in Plath's decision to give her central character a similar name to that of Ethel Rosenberg, she demonstrates the difference between private and public perceptions of the woman, and how the same female character occupies different identities (ibid: 216). "Greenwood" can thus in Ashe's words, be regarded "as corresponding to [feminists] valorisation of certain features of

a woman's complex identity and their repudiation of others" (ibid). According to this feminist interpretation, through Plath's naming of Esther Greenwood, she "selected, isolated, distinguished and reproduced the names that marked Ethel Rosenberg as a private person" (ibid). Ashe proclaims that Plath rubbed out certain factors that pointed to Ethel Rosenberg: her marital status, her maiden name, and her public status as a radical Communist supporter (ibid: 216). In other words, Esther Greenwood is a pure and innocent version of Ethel Rosenberg. According to this analysis, Plath made an effort to bring forward Ethel Rosenberg's private or "inner" qualities through her naming of Esther Greenwood.

Some scholars have argued that Ethel Rosenberg was perhaps of the opinion that she had only two options: to play the role of an insufficient and disreputable mother that she believed she was, or to play the role of "a stoic heroine whom by facing death, she might become" (Ilene Philipson in Ashe, 1995: 218). One can easily draw parallels on this supposition to that of Esther's symbolically divergent views upon motherhood in *The Bell Jar*, with reference to: Esther's relationship to her mother, her divergent views upon herself as a future mother, and images presenting motherhood in the text. For instance, during a therapeutic conversation, Esther admits that she hates her mother: "I hate her I said", and waited for the blow to fall. But Dr Nolan just smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, 'I guess you do'" (BJ, 195). It appears that Esther's hatred for her mother stems from her own fear of ending up like her, entrapped in a conventional life, performing typewriting, and hence becoming the ultimate copying machine. Esther finds it difficult to communicate with her mother as a result of their opposing perceptions on life and values. Mrs Greenwood simply does not understand her daughter, lacking the ability to acknowledge Esther's wishes: "My mother was the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong. She said she was sure the doctors thought she had done

something wrong because they asked her a lot of questions about my toilet training, and I had been perfectly trained at a very early age...”(BJ, 195). Mrs Greenwood has a great confidence in male power, but after Esther’s first unsuccessful electroshock treatment which Esther refuses to repeat, her mother comments that she “knew you’d decide to be all right again” (BJ, 140). Esther’s restricted relationship with her mother had an undeniable effect on Esther’s own perceptions on maternity, and she confesses that she “[hates]...the thought of being under a man’s thumb...A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line...Why was I so unmaternal and apart?”(BJ, 212). Correspondingly, Ethel Rosenberg had a difficult relationship with her mother, Mrs Tessie Greenglass, which also affected her notion on parenting. Ilene Philipson, Ethel Rosenberg’s biographer, is of the opinion that Ethel became the scapegoat of the family as a result of her mother’s bitterness and her brothers’ jealousy of her academic achievements and good nature (in Antler, 1995: 204). According to Philipson, Tessie visited Ethel two months before the impending execution, pleading with her to confirm her guilt while declaring her brother’s innocence (ibid: 205). In response, Ethel flared up and called her mother a witch. Indubitably, Ethel’s upbringing and apprehensive relationship with her mother affected her view on motherliness. All the same, Antler points out that all this focus on good nurturing cropped up in a period where the parental aptitudes were demoted, while specialists and behavioural psychologists’ skills were stressed (ibid). Accordingly, “the notion of motherhood as pathology became a staple of both the popular and scientific press, with all manner of experts holding mothers accountable for creating withdrawn, destructive, disturbed, and deviant children”(ibid). As noticed above, this was ridiculed in *The Bell Jar* when the doctor questioned Esther’s physical health based on toilet training in her premature years.

In the *The Bell Jar* one could argue that the image of Ethel Rosenberg as a “public figure and stoic heroine” and Esther Greenwood as “premarital and nonmaternal” in regards to motherhood have come together, but as Antler acknowledges, this is primarily symbolic for Esther Greenwood, while Ethel Rosenberg represents the core realities for America. In Ashe’s words: “The naming of Esther Greenwood produces a separation and repudiation of ‘Ethel’ as public figure and stoic heroine, along with attempted resuscitation of the private, premarital and nonmaternal” (1995: 218). These characterisations are revealed by Ethel Rosenberg’s public profile in the novel as she is the target of discussions and occupies Esther’s mind. One could say that she holds an indirect role, she is constantly updated on the Rosenberg case through the radio. Esther Greenwood as “premarital and nonmaternal” becomes apparent as the novel develops. She has great troubles with the concept of maternity. Esther has no motherly instinct and is of the opinion that motherhood equals brainwashing: “I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state” (BJ, 81). Carol Hurd Green argues that the death of Ethel Rosenberg became “a piece of [Plath’s] emerging female consciousness” in which her character in *The Bell Jar* “walks into her awareness of the tension between choosing life and choosing death in the context of Ethel Rosenberg’s ambiguously unchosen death” (Green, 1995: 191). But as Ashe points out, Esther has “escaped the fate of the woman found deserving of death” (1995: 229). Thus “death” is a profoundly personal choice for Esther Greenwood.

The features linking Ethel Rosenberg and Esther Greenwood are further noticeable through a conversation on the subject of the Rosenberg case between Esther and Hilda, another participant who won the guest editor place at *Mademoiselle* in New York:

So I said, 'Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?'

The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.

'Yes!' Hilda said, and at last I felt that I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart. It was only as the two of us waiting for the others in the tomb-like morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers.

'It's awful that such people should be alive.'

She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, 'I'm so glad they're going to die' (BJ, 96)

...The night before I'd seen a play here the heroine was possessed by a dybbuk, and when the dybbuk spoke from her mouth it sounded so cavernous and deep you couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman (BJ, 95, 96).

Hilda represents a McCarthyite citizen (Macpherson, 1991: 35). The fact that Hilda acknowledges their death as good is received by Esther as an appalling affirmation. From the interaction between Hilda and Esther, Esther's thoughts wander to a play she had seen the previous evening involving a dybbuk, and she recognizes the features of the dybbuk through Hilda's comments. According to Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is a dislocated soul of a dead person believed to have escaped from "hell". It inhabits a person's body until it has fulfilled the purpose he or she did not complete in his or her former life (wikipedia.org). Through this context Hilda acts in the shape of the dybbuk, infiltrating the environment of *Mlle's* guest editors, creating an atmosphere of darkness and evil. The dybbuk allegory may also be linked to the Rosenbergs' Jewishness. Morton J. Horwitz confirms how Jewish intellectuals interpreted McCarthyism as the expanding of populist fascism in the US, while populism was

treated more kindly by non-Jewish scholars (Horwitz, 1995: 259). The dybbuk could thus be interpreted as a parable of McCarthyism, as McCarthyism, deepened by the Rosenbergs' Jewishness, "touched every raw nerve, every terror of renewed genocidal anti-Semitism, every nightmare that Nazism had embodied" (ibid). The view is supported by David Suchoff, who argues that the Rosenbergs' Jewishness was treated in connection to ideological anti-Communism: "The statecraft of the Rosenberg's execution consisted of using subversive Jewishness as a means of containment, without the end of policing ethnic assimilation ever having to be named" (1995: 162).

According to Rose, Plath's explicit usage of historical references as sub-texts is seen in much of her work (1991: 204). Scholars have pointed out that Plath identified herself with Jewish tradition and even implied to her mother that she perceived herself as an "ethical culturalist: not really a Christian in the true sense of the word...but I am close to the Jewish belief in many ways" (ibid). Plath's own sympathy and identification with Jewishness is also discerned in other "confessional" works like the poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", which both allude to the Holocaust, Jewish suffering and victim identity. Similarly to *The Bell Jar*, the poems in question deal with entrapment and the myth of liberation, as well as Plath's own relationship with her father and male repression. Assessments of "Daddy" have argued that to link her father's behaviour to Nazi Germany and Jewish suffering appear to trivialize Jewish suffering: "Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews. The metaphor is inappropriate...She did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place" (ibid). Marjorie Perloff is of the same opinion, claiming that "Plath's comparison of her personal plight to that of the Jews being deported to Auschwitz or Dachau represents no more than the cliché version of 'the' holocaust" (Perloff, 1992: 650). Plath herself describes "Daddy" in terms of

A girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other—she has to act the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it (Plath, 1981: 293).

“Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus” and *The Bell Jar*’s female narrators are all triumphant in the end, having conquered their suffering, viewed in the texts’ last sequences; while Esther confirms that she aspired to feel sure and knowledgeable upon her exit from Belzie, she in truth felt like a question mark, but as “by a magical thread” she stepped into the room guided by the helpful faces (BJ, 233-234). The last stanzas of the two poems at issue reveal comparable resolutions: while the ending verse line in “Daddy” proclaims “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Plath, 2004: 75), “Lady Lazarus” states:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air (Plath, 2004: 17).

Another image of Jewish symbolism is to be found through Esther’s description of a story from *The Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year* received from the *Ladies Day*. Esther describes the story of a fig tree where a Jewish man and a nun meet. Their relationship is doomed, and she identifies Buddy Willard and herself as that couple, “It seemed to me Buddy Willard and I were like that Jewish man and that nun, only we weren’t Jewish or Catholics but Unitarians” (BJ, 52). Their relationship is doomed as Esther links the image of the fig tree where a baby bird is breaking its way out of the egg to an image of a woman in labour: “What we had seen wasn’t a bird coming out of an egg but a baby coming out of a

woman, and then something awful happened and we went our separate ways” (BJ, 52). When the image of the fig tree reoccurs later in the novel, its religious context has been removed, and here Esther’s divergent choices in life are stressed. She imagines that each fig represents a different set of opportunities: “One fig was a husband and children, and another fig was a famous poet...and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America...”(BJ, 73). She can only choose one fig, but because she is reluctant to choose between them, she becomes paralyzed, unable to choose any, and the figs rot and fall to the ground. The fig tree turns out to symbolize Esther’s choices in life. Each fig represents a different future, and hence stands out as a critique of the female entrapment advocated in the fifties, where combining professions with motherhood proved difficult if not impossible. In the novel this is related to Esther’s combating choices in life: career versus motherhood, sexuality versus purity and conventionality versus political and ideological awareness. The fig tree fable could be interpreted as a metaphor on the *bildungsroman* as it represents universal choices for adolescent characters like Esther Greenwood. The fully fledged Ethel Rosenberg’s choices were narrower. Previously I have argued that Ethel Rosenberg may have been of the opinion that she only had two conflicting set of roles to choose from: the devoted wife and mother of two little boys or as a Communist radical. Being written off as a bad mother together with her disinclination to break down during her trial, fuelled the belief that she dedicated more value to her political beliefs than to parenthood (Antler, 1995: 207).

If we return to the dybbuk segment, one may argue that the dark atmosphere is also strengthened by the uncertainty connected to gender categorization, “you couldn’t tell whether it was a man or woman”. Interestingly, this phrase recurs later in the text as well when Esther is hospitalized after having tried to commit suicide: Esther lies in bed and the nurse grudgingly hands over a mirror, allowing Esther to study her bruised face: “*You*

couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because the hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over her head...The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colours. I smiled. The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin. A minute after the crash another nurse ran in" (BJ, 168). The mirror cracks on the floor as Esther recalls her gender identity. In this perspective her disfigured face represents Esther's struggle to bring together the external self she shows her society with the internal self which she in fact experiences. Both scenes point to the difficulty of being a woman in a world whose expectations are impossible to obtain. If related to Ethel Rosenberg, her external self as constructed in the press and public space revealed the story of a woman who was punished for not taking on the expected women's roles: "Silent and mysterious, conspiratorial and political, dominating and evil" (Antler, 1995: 207), she was considered more in touch with manly behaviour. The "you couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman" strophe from *The Bell Jar* may thus be regarded in relation to Ethel Rosenberg's "enigmatic" and "unnatural" performance as a "steely, stoney, tight-lipped woman" (ibid: 206).

The dybbuk allegory unmistakably states Esther's political protest. It becomes apparent that Plath condemns their execution and the Cold War rhetoric. She criticises conformity and its cultural and political limits on democracy itself (Rose, 1991: 196). But at a second glance it does tell us something more. Esther's fascination for the Rosenberg case also includes its attractive and seductive dimensions (Ashe, 1995: 219): Plath exposes Hilda as a yearning cat with a "pale orange mouth", recounting the movements of Hilda's sensual lips. *The Bell Jar* also put forward close ancestral desires within Esther's fixation upon the Rosenbergs. Even though Esther confirms that "she will never be a mother" and one can argue that she rejects maternal qualities, *The Bell Jar* reveals that Esther will develop familial attachment after

challenges and downfalls. Following her recovery at the asylum, Esther does not view the world in black and white, and is not entirely antagonistic towards the idea of motherhood. In the introductory chapter of the novel where Esther is looking back at her experiences in *Miles* establishment, she describes the presents and items from her stay, and while doing that, she let slip that she herself has become a mother:

“I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterwards I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipstick now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sun-glasses case for the baby to play with” (BJ, 3).

Moving away from the dybbuk piece, the inclusion of the Rosenberg’s executions also reveals the novels thematically involvement with death. The last wording of the introduction, “the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs”, inspires a sense of “electricity and the proximity of death” (Ashe, 1995: 220). However, the central character can’t make up her mind on how to handle this nearness of death. The introduction is marked by reliance on either-or-ness. On the one hand she alleges that she is “stupid about executions”, on the other hand she asserts that it has nothing to do with her. Nevertheless, she can’t help thinking, “what it would be like, being burned alive along your nerves”, and with a concluding remark says, “I thought it must be the worst thing in the world” (BJ, 1). The fact that the novel’s starting point is set in the summer makes one realize that the terrible heat is not as much an outcome of nice weather, as it is a result of an intense feeling of death analogous to the fiery electrocution (Wagner-Martin, 1992: 24). Even though Esther is in New York and should have the time of her life, she can’t let go of the Rosenberg case. She is encircled by its proximity, incapable to break out of it (Ashe, 1995: 220).

“I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn’t get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterwards, the cadaver’s head or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and the face of Buddy Willard who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place, and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver’s head around with me on a string, like some black noseless balloon stinking of vinegar” (BJ, 1).

Esther is aware of her own mental condition, and realizes that the reoccurrence of the cadaver images reflects her mental state, “I knew something was wrong with me that summer because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs” (BJ, 2).

1.3 Death and Rebirth through ECT

It becomes apparent that the execution of the Rosenbergs functions as precursor to Esther’s own mental health, equally as it emphasises the linkage between electroshock treatment and capital punishment. Even though the Rosenbergs’ destinies first are presented to describe the political landscape, their ghosts reappear later in the text as well. Esther does not view Doctor Gordon’s shock treatment as therapy, but as punishment for an unknown crime:

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, thought an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. *I wondered what terrible things it was I had done* (BJ, 138).

Esther’s distrust in other individuals becomes a sort of resistance and shelter. She portrays herself as a victim of state control, like the Rosenbergs. The electroshock therapy is supposed

to make her adapt and conform to the cultural mainstream, which is responsible for her depression in the first place. As Eisler put it: “the therapeutic culture had arrived at a definition of mental health as social adjustment to roles” (in Macpherson, 1991: 3). Failure to adapt to these anticipated norms or reluctance to conform to them was an evident symptom of illness. Denise Russell further states how the disagreement between an individual and society could be regarded as dysfunctional as the average ‘functional’ individual is quite narrowly classified, especially for Western women: “If it is the case that modern Western societies are dominated by patriarchal norms, then women rejecting such norms may find it very difficult for this position to be viewed simply as a conflict between an individual and society and not simultaneously dysfunctional” (Russell, 1995: 35). As a response to the revised interest in functionalism, based on Freud’s hypothesis on children’s acquirement of gender identity and family structures, electroshock treatment was regarded as the preferred therapy for women in the fifties to re-establish these expected qualities.

In *The Bell Jar* Esther travels from one location to another. Her journey is primarily an inner one, internally into the self and externally to the world. Her illness is a result of the world surrounding her (De Laurentis, 1976: 125). However, Esther’s alienation is not individually oriented, but a feature of existence. “Esther’s madness is not another country, it is New York in the fifties” (ibid): “...I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty...” (BJ, 2). Still, it is when she returns home after not having been accepted to the writing course that her psychic and physical disintegration essentially occurs: “All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green shirt

plummet into the gap” (BJ, 110). The person with the white blouse and green shirt is Esther, speaking about herself in the third person, referring to herself as a dead body. *The Bell Jar* is filled with metaphors and references to death. As I will discuss further, the airless bell jar and the question of space are also central metaphors of Esther’s anxieties regarding death.

Esther becomes incapable of continuing a progressive education like her peers. Her entry into adulthood is actually a regression into madness instead. This becomes symbolically noticeable through her effort to write a novel about herself under the pseudonym Elaine. She finds herself unable to proceed with the writing process because of her lack of experiences in life. This is even more markedly illustrated through her struggle to write a letter, “When I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew” (BJ, 125). She eventually decides to work with her master’s thesis during the summer, reading *Finnegan’s Wake*, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it as her eyes “sank through an alphabet soup of letters to the long word in the middle of the page” (BJ, 119).

Staying at home with her mother in the suburbs increases her anxieties and deepens her depression: “Eating, sleeping, reading and everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end” (BJ, 123-124). She summarizes the suburban existence in the following words: “the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me. It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies. A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death” (BJ, 109). The question of death increasingly preoccupies her mind. She is attached to enclosed spaces, such as the zoo, the prison, the graveyard, the deep sea, and finally the gloomy basement where she tries to commit suicide,

taking an overdose of pills (De Lauretis, 1988: 129). The space of the graveyard is connected to death as it reminds Esther of the loss of her father. His early demise provides him with power through Esther's imagination of him. Esther never felt that she received his approval; his standards were unreachable. When she is visiting his grave, it is an act of preparation towards suicide, as is Esther's day out on the beach. She aspires to swim to a rock, a mile out in the sea, but refuses as she would most likely crawl up on the rock to regain strength. For that reason she decides to drown her self then and there instead:

"I brought my hands to my breast, ducked my head, and dived, using my hands to push the water aside. The water pressed in on my eardrums and on my heart. I fanned myself down, but before I knew where I was, the water had spat me up into the sun...I dived, and dived again, and each time I popped up like a cork...I knew then that I was beaten. I turned back" (BJ, 154-155).

According to De Lauretis, these preformed rituals prior to her attempted suicide are an attempt to objectify herself, and are thus symbolic of what De Lauretis after "rebirth" summons up as "water, purification, apathy, isolation birth and death, the unified elements of the bell jar" (ibid: 129).

Carol Warren asserts that female conformity in the 50's "contains the structural potential of going crazy, for feeling locked up and unable to get out by any means short of madness" (1987: 38). Furthermore, she argues that madness and insane asylums are mirror images of female experience and are punishments both for being a woman and for yearning not to be (ibid). From this perspective madness is a result of repressive gender roles, where the female performs the 'expressive' role, whereas the male fulfils the 'instrumental role' (Parsons in Macpherson, 1991: 3). Whether the female chooses to adapt to these gender roles or not, she

would be penalized for not being able to conform to the ascribed norms, or be punished by the fact that she willingly adheres to the norms. In *The Bell Jar* this is related to conformity as the speaker feels alienated by the expectations placed on her shoulders. The society's norms expect her to snuggle down and marry a suitable husband, while Esther wants to write and explore life that societal norms denies her. The roles for women consist only of exclusive choices, which only fuel her madness.

In *The Bell Jar* the title itself symbolizes the definitive insanity and the idea of being locked up. When captivated by madness, Esther feels as if she is inside an airless jar that alters her perception on the world and keeps her from connecting with other people. Later she is taken proper care of by Dr Nolan, a progressive female psychiatrist, through talk therapy, insulin injections and electroshock treatment. During her stay in the asylum Esther learns that electroshock treatments given in the mornings would be announced beforehand. But as Esther does not receive her breakfast tray one morning, she realizes that she has not been warned about the coming electroshock treatment. Had she been warned beforehand, she would have been "composed and ready. I would have gone down the hall...with dignity, like a person coolly resigned to execution" (BJ, 203). Once again, this depicts Esther's identification with Ethel Rosenberg. If she had been informed, she could have gathered stateliness and bravery like Ethel Rosenberg (Ashe, 1995: 228). Still, the electroshock treatment comes not to represent her downfall: instead she undergoes rebirth. Esther's renaissance is symbolically confirmed through the ball image at the ending of Chapter Fourteen. If one recalls the scene in which Esther lies in hospital after her unsuccessful suicide attempt, dropping her mirror, making it go to pieces after having seen her ruined face, one may argue that the ball scene represents the reverse. While Esther's self previously was

coming apart, figuratively like the smashed mirror, she is now regaining control over her condition:

I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and *if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again. I smiled and smiled at the small silver ball* (BJ, 176).

At the end of the novel Esther declares that she is whole and well again, back on the road. But she lets us know that although the bell jar has been removed, it is still dangling over her head. She can't guarantee that it will not encircle her again. But she confirms that she remembers everything that happened to her the fatal summer of 1953,

I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a gray skull. Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape (BJ, 227).

The ending sentence "They were my landscape" indicates that Esther has come to terms with her past experiences. She acknowledges that her "landscape" contains not only pleasant memories, but that they nevertheless are a part of her reborn self.

According to Warren, a side effect of the ECT was loss of memory. But while the medical profession categorized memory loss as a by-product, the affected women categorized it as its

purpose, in which the purpose of electroshock treatment was memory loss (Warren, 1987: 130). In Jane Ussher's wording: "Madness (aberrant femininity) is replaced by acquiescence (acceptable femininity)". The woman's "madness abates because she can no longer think; she cannot remember" (1991: 174-175). In "Poem for a Birthday" Plath portrays ECT like this:

Now they light me up like an electric bulb.

For weeks I can remember nothing at all (ibid).

Even if Esther recalls being unable to think about knives after her first ECT, she declares that she remembers everything that took place the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs. The ECT re-established the patient's old selves or transformed the female into new selves (Warren, 1987: 144). If one reads this comment in relation to the Rosenbergs, one could claim that Esther's many selves have been united to one self. She has found her identity by her identification with Ethel Rosenberg. Esther comes to recognize her new relation between her sense of self and reality. After the funeral of Joan, her co-patient who committed suicide, Esther becomes aware of her own recovery and newly identified self: she "took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of [her] heart" and she avers: "I am I am I am" (BJ, 233). While the power of electricity turns out to be deadly to Ethel Rosenberg, it has a re-birthing effect on Esther. In contrast to Ethel Rosenberg, it appears that Esther has managed to put out the disconcerting gender identity which caught Ethel Rosenberg in the end. While Ethel was found worthy of death, Esther has moved on from her acquaintances with electrocution and been reborn and converted (Ashe, 1995: 229). Ussher contradicts this view. She does not find Esther's converted path reliable as she was the victim of "the epitome of misogynistic control over woman, legitimated as 'psychiatric care'" (1997: 175). In her view, female characters portrayed in feminist novels such as *The Bell Jar* are not considered as heroines: "they are

not celebrating their madness as a release of thwarted creativity, but are tragically repressed and misplaced” (ibid).

Scholars have disapproved of Plath’s use of historical references in her writing, arguing that the way in which she uses historical facts and fictional portraits are too extreme and blown out of proportions. But on the other hand, since much of her writing is based on her autobiographical references, evidently through her *Journals*, one comes to realize that Plath was truly caught up in political issues, and carried them out as an underlying theme in several of her works. Similarly with Hilda’s yearning and “it is awful such people should still be alive” comment about the Rosenbergs in *The Bell Jar*, Plath makes use of this yawn in a related episode in her *Journals*: “The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely, bored and casual and complacent yawn” (Plath, 2002: 542). Even if the grouping of execution and electroshock treatment appear far fetched, it comes to symbolize the bleak reality of a troubled woman. While the parallel between the execution image and ECT may be viewed as excessive, the inclusion of the former contributes as a pictorial metaphor, or a lens through which Esther Greenwood views the world. As Rose proclaims, “the fate of the Rosenbergs was intimately bound up with the fate of narrative [Esther], their execution signalling, for one political imaginary, the end of narrative resolution, the end of ending as such” (1991: 198). Rose also points out how the Rosenberg trial was to become a battle over the essential meaning and boundaries of American culture in the Eisenhower years, where the threat of Communism was connected to mass culture, referred to by Rose as “pretty-bourgeois Stalinised taste” (ibid: 196).

1.4 Policing the woman initiates mental illness

The Red Scare paranoia, symbolized by Senator Joseph McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover and the

establishment of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), rhetorically stressed national, family and mental health, and thus constructed the most widespread surveillance system in American history (Macpherson, 1991: 1). During the fifties, the image of conformity was the expected ideology to follow. Many citizens who spoke a foreign language, held a different religion, or in other ways did not fit WASP ideology, were branded as aliens and became subject to scrutiny and investigation by the state (ibid). The Rosenbergs were the casualties of the post war paranoia, in the strongest alignment as spies and Communists, and in milder form, as Jews and Ethel's sturdy womanhood perceived as an aspect of "the alien nature of this Enemy Within" (ibid: 2). McCarthy's panel depended on secret surveillance of a nation's citizens and civic publicity through visualisations and big headlines in the media (ibid). The fear of surveillance and public enquiry triggered paranoia among Communist sympathizers and non-aligned citizens all the same, a paranoia which undercut American democratic rights and freedom of speech (ibid). As Arthur Miller put it,

It was not only the rise of McCarthyism that moved me, but something that seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality, a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance... The terror in these people was being knowingly planned and consciously engineered, and yet all they knew was terror" (Miller, 1965: 39-40)

Michel Foucault alleges, "if power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?" (Benjamin, 1988: 4). Foucault's theory of "Panopticism" confirms the concept of repression, describing how control is exercised and power relations constituted through the machinery of surveillance. I will use this architectural figure as a keystone for my discussion, underlining

how the Cold War paranoia has a bearing on Esther Greenwood's approach to the oppressive customs of the fifties America, norms which put emphasis on the authoritarian existence through the medical, commercial and lawful collective gaze (Macpherson, 1991: 3). One could argue, as Macpherson does, that *The Bell Jar* is Esther's analytical reflections on the collective gaze and the troublesome process of defining one's life and self (ibid). The outline of the Panopticon was first introduced by Jeremy Bentham, while Foucault revised it, arguing how its shape and power are implemented in institutions and everyday practice through surveillance and the arrangement of space. Foucault claims that the ideal modern disciplinary power is brought into being through this machine, which is a model aiming at a constant watch of the individual in public institutions such as prisons, hospitals and schools. The construction is spherical, with an observation tower at the centre penetrated with windows towards the inner side of the circle where the "convicts" are incarcerated in individual cells, each with a window situated towards the watch tower. The design of the lighting prohibits the convicted from distinguishing the supervisor, whereas the supervisor may spot every move of the inmate from the tower. Consequently, the inmate is incapable of knowing when he is being observed, and he cannot recognize the person who is performing the surveillance (Foucault, 1979: 200). For that reason the inmate is obliged to follow the institution's law and order and to pursue her or his anticipated roles in a self-policing fashion. The power system emphasized in the Panopticon is complex. It is not just one over another, "Rather than the massive binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and ramification of power" (ibid: 198). Foucault also suggests that "the more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed" (ibid: 32). Hence, he claims that disciplinary power is also observable in the society at large: "One

also sees the spread of disciplinary procedures, not in the form of enclosed institutions, but as centres of observation disseminated through society” (ibid: 212).

Similarly to the disciplinary role religious groups have had throughout history, one may argue that the same phenomenon took place in the aftermath of World War II. The Cold War hysteria was very much a result of surveillance systems implemented from the state and carried out by both the government and citizens, observing each other at work, in the neighbourhood and through acquaintances. One didn’t know who to trust, everybody could be a potential Communist spy or sympathizer. Being constrained in one’s freedom of speech, American citizens were always on the guard as the “gaze is alert everywhere” (ibid: 195). Esther does not utter her opinions in public space: she remains silent. Her intensifying world-weariness and opposition is never acted upon, until her collapse. Esther’s quiet response to Hilda’s declaration on the Rosenbergs confirms the ways in which McCarthyism implemented its “normative tyranny” (Macpherson, 1991: 39).

The weighted atmosphere between ‘us’ versus ‘them’ established the notion of disease as a metaphor for Communism, and hence become anti Communism’s most effective instrument in the combat for the American citizens’ hearts and minds (ibid: 33). A disease in the respect that if transmitted, the disease would grow and thus the number of Communists would spread. To portray the Communists in negative terms increased common citizens’ fear, and thus their readiness to put the disease down. As a consequence of the repressive norms of the mid fifties, Esther performs self-policing, reluctant to react to the normative tyranny of the anti Communist era. Macpherson states that the one dimensional conventionality based on ‘image’ in the Post War era, was the only norm to perform and thus attained the position as the official language (ibid: 1). American citizens speaking a different language or holding

non-mainstream opinions were regularly defined as aliens, and hence investigated by the national authority. Greenblatt claims that “containment of a theatrically staged subversion was a cultural practice developed in early modern England and that such a theatre of false subversion was crucial both to the enterprise of modern self-making and to the exercise of power in the early modern state” (in Suchoff, 1995: 156). Suchoff recognizes his analysis to fit with 50’s America, in which “the alien was marked for attack and when the creation of a liberal critical identity meant keeping alien attachment to the Jewish Left bay”. Foucault claims that “our society is not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of the images, one invests bodies in depth...” (Foucault, 1979: 217). Sawicki asserts that the efficiency of self-policing is its ability to get a hold of the individual at a very early stage of self-understanding and the norms that direct our identity patterns (in O’Grady, 2005: 19). In this way, when an individual like *The Bell Jar*’s Esther Greenwood fails to adapt to the conventional frame of mind, her sense of self is experienced as ‘wrong’. She does not affirm the mainstream culture and she is highly aware of her lack of collective affirmation. She is unable to obtain autonomy and a feeling of self, as a result of the wider societal devices, in terms of power and control, which eventually is the direct source of her nervous breakdown. Lois McNay emphasize that the self-policing culture in women’s identity development is a consequence of the historical notion that claims that women are inferior to men based on comparisons with male bodies and male measurements (in O’Grady, 2005: 27). According to Swan, the female’s sense of being second rate is “understood to be a direct consequence of the ways patriarchy operates in women’s lives to undermine our sense of self and thus, through self-surveillance, maintain particular relations of power” (Swan, 1999: 105).

In *The Bell Jar* there appears to be few leading male characters. However, it has been argued that it is their actions which draw the storyline forward, directing the tale, women characters

and the narrative's outcome (Wagner-Martin, 1992: 47). In her novel Plath places the male figures in a cultural setting which itself provides them with power. The UN interpreter Constantin, her boyfriend Buddy Willard, the woman-hater Marco and her teacher Manzi all symbolize institutionalized patriarchy. Through physical and emotional encounters Esther learns the callous reality of men's "erotic, financial and domestic power" (ibid: 47, 50). Patriarchal ideology informs Esther that she is to blame if taken advantage of, as the female is

Especially prone to guilt, and to a form of concern for relationship with others which can lead, for example, to the feeling that "not upsetting people" must always be given priority, and that it can *never* be right to do something which will fracture a relationship or break a connection. They are prone, too, to the feeling that they should never put their own needs or desires before those of others (Grimshaw, 1986: 196).

This statement is recognizable through Esther's manners in *The Bell Jar*. In one of the early passages, Willard proclaims that "poems are like dust". Esther does not agree, but keeps her opinion to herself and replies that she guesses he must be right. Another example is found during Esther's meeting with Jay Cee. She advises Esther to study more languages, in particular German and French. Esther couldn't disagree more, as she is comparing the structure of language to that of mathematics. Yet, she doesn't utter her real opinion, replying that learning a new language would indeed be a useful resource in her writing. It appears that Esther has a strong need to please. She is the good girl, a straight A student and the devoted girlfriend trying to fit into her surroundings. But one may also argue that this behaviour is a product of Esther's divided self, the split between Esther's inner self and outer behaviour (Perloff, 1972: 508). While Esther's inner self is engaged in observation and fantasy about her own outer shell and actions, she actually acts as her external self or false-self. Seen from

this perspective, it is Esther's inner self observing her own actions in her conversation with Jay Cee, as mentioned above. When Jay Cee questions her about her further plans after graduation, Esther's inner self observes her own outer self answer:

“‘I don't really know,’ I heard myself say...It sounded true, and I recognized it the way you recognize some nondescript person that's been hanging around your door for ages and then suddenly comes up and introduces himself as your real father and looks exactly like you, so you know he really is your father, and the person you thought all your life was your father is a sham” (BJ 30).

The use of the word 'father' in this context indicates patriarchy. According to Rose, patriarchy denotes that the male gender is at fault, as the female “internalises” and withdraws from her own self, in order to escape from the cruelty of the society outside (Rose, 1991: 6). Rose further states that in Plath's works, someone needs to be held responsible for these negative aspects (ibid). In her writing it often turns out to involve the father figure and the father-daughter relationship. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther accuses Mrs Greenwood of preventing her from mourning her father's death or taking part in his burial, claiming that “I had always been my father's favourite, and it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning that my mother had never bothered with” (BJ, 159). She grieves not only the death of her father, but the loss of his memory (Wagner-Martin, 1992: 53).

If we return to Esther's conversation with Jay Cee, one comes to realize that her answers do not match her true visions for her future. Throughout the novel one receives the impression that Esther wishes to continue to write, become a professor and write books. In many ways one may argue that the essential battle in *The Bell Jar* is Esther's struggle to heal the rupture between her inner self and the false outer self and thus to break free from self policing

(Perloff, 1972: 509). One may argue that Esther's tendencies to practise over-responsibility for others, must be related to the novel's historical setting, where ideas about female inferiority lead women to perform self-policing. In Foucault's words the Panopticon has the aptitude to create a sense of inferiority within the human body as: "he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power in which he simultaneously plays both roles; *he becomes the principle of his own subjection*" (Foucault, 1979: 202-203).

The novel's flashbacks provide us with the impression that Esther has always played the roles which others have wanted her to play. Helen O'Grady proclaims that this kind of identification of self prevents spontaneity and weakens the chances of active participation in the making of the female identity (2005: 32). Furthermore, she argues that women have a tendency to police themselves and criticise their own performances within the broader culture (ibid). In the broader culture's representations, for example in the media, the female body is frequently represented as a kind of uniform, representing an unrealistic standard. This strategy of negative self-policing tends to happen automatically; it becomes a natural part of our thinking and therefore difficult to discover (ibid: 33). Grady further notes that self-blame in the form of comparing oneself in a negative manner towards perceived features and measurement of other persons tends to evoke the feeling of "disempowerment" and a deepened feeling of meagreness (ibid: 34). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is constantly comparing her qualities with other characters. During her stay in New York, she is comparing herself to the contrasting individuals of Doreen and Betsy. Doreen belongs to the upper middle class: she is very self-confident and noticed by her masculine deeds. Betsy comes from rural Arizona, and represents the conventional norm for women in the 50's. While Esther admires

Doreen, she comes to realize that she is over the top. Betty on the other hand appears to Esther as tedious, but still, she is the one she turns to at the end of her stay in New York. Grady proclaims that negative comparisons with others may lead to personal isolation. By strengthening the belief in personal shortages, negative comparisons with other individuals make unity with others difficult. According to her, this personal exile represents the ultimate aspect of panoptical power (ibid: 35). Sandra Lee Bartky is of the same opinion, arguing that female segregation is a direct result of a feeling of an all-encompassing scantiness, “The need for secrecy and concealment that figures so largely in [this type of] shame experience is disempowering as well, for it isolates the oppressed from one another and in this way works against the emergence of a sense of solidarity” (Bartky, 1990: 97). Mary Evans argues that Sylvia Plath’s novel debates how the self ought to be preserved by women in an era seeking to flatten and weaken women’s sense of a secure identity (2000: 83). *The Bell Jar* illustrates to what extent a woman creates and maintains conventional culture, but also more importantly the cost of doing so (ibid). If one brings Foucault back into the discussion, one may assert that the female’s construction and sustainability of a conventional culture ought to be seen in correlation to Foucault’s definition of self-policing, whereas their costs in forms of psychological health and gendered isolation is to be viewed as a direct outcome of self-policing, or the Panopticon itself. In the ending chapters of *The Bell Jar* it appears that Esther has chosen femininity, endeavouring to be in possession of her own future. Still, her decision in doing so reveals Esther’s anxiety on accepting “a feminine fate” which could lead to pain and objection (Bundtzen, 1983: 149).

Elaine Taylor May maintains that there was a direct linkage between Cold War politics and the fear of sexual chaos, where fears of sexual chaos tend to accelerate in crises and quick social change (May, 1988: 93). She examines how containment was the answer to security,

an ideology originally applied to state the US's foreign policy, arguing that the atomic bomb would not be considered as a menace if one contained it (ibid: 14). Nevertheless, the principals of containment moved towards the domestic field, where in May's wording it was "bolstered by a powerful political culture that rewarded its adherents and marginalized its detractors", and hence "aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behaviour, and even political values were focused on the home" in the Cold War era (ibid). As the containment ideology reached the private sphere of the home and domestic life, individual's sexual expression was on target. The initial fear of communism had migrated in the direction of gender anxiety. A wide spectre of Americans believed wholeheartedly that there was a direct correlation between sexual immorality and communism (ibid: 94): The Soviet Union was not only capable of destroying the US on atomic grounds, but through internal subversion too (ibid). As a result of these outlooks, family stability was addressed. The bizarre surveillance system in this era draws from a revived investment in home safety (Nelson, 2002: 14). Nelson asserts that surveillance of the private realm was justified for the reason of global political survival (ibid: 11). According to Nelson, this rhetorically stressed view upon "the American way" led to increased numbers of invasions through both the social and political arena, and extended surveillance to fields that did not seem political in the normal sense, investigating gender, sexuality, mental health and personality (ibid: 11). One may argue that a number of these features are observed through Esther Greenwood's inner turmoil. In her novel Plath takes advantage of a recognizable medical setting of the fifties to picture the enveloping movement of the medical discipline towards the confidential room of the body. By doing so, she questions the bond between bodily privacy, sexual difference and language, thus exemplifying the female's loss of bodily privacy (ibid 117). Nelson asserts that many confessional artists in company with Plath were not satisfied with simply uncovering and stripping the body and therefore made use of a medical context and

“operation poems” to demonstrate what they considered to be “the metaphors of surface and depth, inside and outside, that structured the privacy of traditional poetic and legal discourse”(ibid).

The criticism of the medical profession is very much present in *The Bell Jar*. When Buddy convinces Esther to witness a woman in labour at his medical school, Esther is disturbed by the nonchalant attitude of the doctors, paying little attention to the patient’s suffering. She is not comforted by Buddy’s comment that the labouring woman has received a drug that makes her forget her pain afterwards. Esther acknowledges that “it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent...she [the woman giving birth] would go straight home and start another baby...in some secret part of her that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her again” (BJ, 62). Similarly, Esther finds the electroshock treatment by the arrogant Doctor Gordon both traumatic and unhelpful, receiving the impression that her body is being invaded. Examples of loss of bodily privacy are also recognized in the scene in which Esther has to undress in front of the camera to be graded in gymnastics. Nelson is of the opinion that the opening up of the body to depict the inside disturbs the idea of a private inner physical space (2002: 117). According to Foucault there is no such thing as privacy, as the private is already penetrated by power. There is only an illusion of privacy established by political institutions, but no actual space (ibid: 27). This is exemplified in *The Bell Jar* through the male head of “households or church or school...distributing power on the basis of tribal law”, and carried out through the older women characters effort to uphold this patriarchal view through their attempt to form Esther; “as for the traditional male, Esther exists to be shaped” (Wagner-Martin, 1992: 47, 52).

As the title implies, Esther appears to be immovable underneath the bell jar. She is on display in her private realm, as her mother, Mrs Willard and Buddy, among others have clear understandings of her external duties as a future mother and wife. Accordingly, the summer Esther spends at home with her mother, she rebels against the atmosphere of her upbringing. Esther's rebellion is connected to the femininity of her mother's home. Here, Mrs Greenwood materializes as the spokesperson for familial control (Lant, 1993: 631). One may argue that Mrs Greenwood, Mrs Willard and Buddy's personal traits functions as a micro lense on the American society in general. They have been coloured by the public institutions, and conform to its schemes in the private space of their homes.

The social organization on the whole and the institutional asylum on the micro level may be held responsible for women's health. Similarly with Foucault's disciplinary power through the model of the Panopticon, Warren proclaims that there has been a concerted focus in the belief of social organization as the source of mental illness among women, rather than the individual's body (Warren, 1987: 43). The social structure in general is the manifestation for female madness. Still, other scholars have criticized the asylum, claiming that the social arrangements developed to produce a cure upon mental illness has a tendency to emphasize the social identity of the mental patient, which might lead to stigmatisation of the patient through labelling theory (ibid). The patient is labelled in relation to his or her condition as mentally ill or schizophrenic. This labelling produces social control and the power to make one's label linger (ibid). By the fact that more females than males make use of psychiatric treatment, men receive more power to control the women (ibid: 43-44). According to Warren, two-thirds of the patients receiving ECT in the 50's were women. Medical scholars have argued that women outnumber men because they are more depressed than their counterparts. Ex-patients and feminists have repudiated this notion, being of the opinion that

ECT treatment is men's way of gaining patriarchal control over women (ibid: 129). In Bozarth's words: "Calling unusual, perhaps troublesome behaviour an illness allows any woman to be punished with psychiatric imprisonment, shock, psychosurgery, drugs, branding, loss of credibility. What a convenient way to control housewives who don't live up to the expectations of their husbands" (ibid). Conversely, scholars such as Brant Wenegrat have claimed that female disorders stems from their lack of social power, defined as "the ability to provide for one's needs and security and the needs and security of loved ones and to make life decisions based on one's own interests" (Wenegrat, 1995: 136).

In *The Bell Jar* both the feature of 'social organization as the cause for mental illness' and the feature of 'the asylum as the reason for mental illness' appear on different levels: If viewed as a bildungsroman, Esther is searching for identity in the publishing industry of Manhattan. Her societal options are marked by an either-or-ness that she does not find satisfying. Therefore, Esther's inability to adapt to the institutionalised containment ideology of the fifties ultimately becomes her tragic flaw. Her body scheme did not correlate with the politics of containment in the Cold War era. If one chooses to narrow down the definition, one may assert that the asylum itself functions as a forerunner to mental breakdowns. Warren asserts that the asylum has traditionally overstressed the social identity of the patient, and hence, has labelled the patient in terms her/his psychological condition. As Esther has been identified as a schizophrenic, it becomes a part of her personal scheme. Warren's second statement in this context, arguing that psychiatric treatment occurs more often among women than men, and thus gives men power over women, is revealed through Esther's associations with Doctor Gordon, her stay at the asylum, and Buddy's reaction to her illness. Dr Nolan warns her that people would treat her tentatively after her stay at the asylum, evading her presence "like a leper with a warning bell" (BJ, 226). This is acknowledged through Buddy's

query on Esther's future possibilities while visiting her at the institution: "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther. Now you've been...here" (BJ, 231). Interestingly, the comment is uttered after his concern that it might have been him who drove both Joan and Esther mad: "Do you think that there is something in me that drives women crazy?" (BJ, 229). As mentioned previously, Esther receives the same impression of male control when she joins Buddy at his grand tour of the medical profession, watching a woman in labour, comforting Esther that she will not remember her pain afterwards. Likewise women's loss of memory after electroshock treatment was used as adjustment towards recovery. In Esther's mind both methods "redefined the behavioural control of women patients under the principle of adjustment towards normalcy" (Macpherson, 1991: 55). The latter avowal may thus be tied to Ethel Rosenberg and the ideology of Communism; Ethel Rosenberg refused to alter to the prescribed gender roles, being viewed as superior to her husband and a neglectful mother, combined with an eagerness to confront the system by invoking the Fifth Amendment, and based on these grounds she was executed. Perhaps it is an implausible proposal, but might Ethel Rosenberg's electrocution be read as the absolute adjustment?

1.5 Concluding remarks

Throughout this chapter I have endeavoured to detect historical aspects that may define *The Bell Jar* in a socio-political context, in relation to the Rosenberg case and medical procedures of the McCarthy era. Although hardly a political novel, it depicts how a young woman's internal self is influenced by the external Cold War, where its oppressive gender based logic leads to female illness. By the methodological benefits of Michel Foucault's theories on disciplinary power through the abstract construction of the Panopticon, among other perspectives, I have tried to illustrate how a seemingly free young woman is trapped by the performance of self policing and the surveillance system in general, in a social order where

domestic privacy is constantly at risk. Her life is controlled by a system of surveillance where the private sphere is penetrated throughout. In my opinion this is an important approach as female identity and relation to one's self were, and conceivably is still shaped by this structure of surveillance. As one will further see in the subsequent chapter, the female self is performing self policing through other channels besides the political intrusion of the private, through the "fashioned" self and navigating the male gaze. Yet all of this can be encompassed within the Panopticon.

CHAPTER TWO

The female catch-22 during the 1950's

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter my focus will be to further reveal how women of the fifties participated in self-policing, and I will continue to develop this through Foucault's understanding of disciplinary power and the Panopticon. Thus, my emphasis has changed from the former chapter. In this second chapter I seek to a greater extent to reveal the impact of the mainstream culture on Esther's self acknowledgement and acceptance, very much related to suburban life, the divisions between career versus motherhood, purity versus sexuality and domesticity versus education. In this section I will first make a brief introduction to the women's liberation movement, discussing pioneer feminists like Betty Friedan and Anne Parsons. More concretely, I seek to reveal how their agenda centred upon women's personal lives, their sexuality and bodies. I will argue that the American society on the one hand promoted sexual Puritanism, but on the other hand hyped and commercialised sex in advertising and movies. In addition, I would like to include some reflections on Foucault's definition of power lines and the "repressive hypothesis" from *The History of Sexuality*. My chief aim for this chapter as a whole will be to touch upon the intriguing affiliations between power, femininity and heterosexuality in *The Bell Jar*.

2.2 The Feminine Mystique

As one is writing about female gender identity and female bodies in the fifties, it is difficult to omit Betty Friedan, a feminist writer and spokeswoman who gained a lot of attention for her *Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963. The book argues how middle class women were denied roles in the public sphere and were instead directed towards the private sphere of the

household, which exasperated many women. Critics have passed judgment on the book's validity though, arguing that it presupposes that white middle class troubles were universal. Moreover, it has been criticized for its limited philosophical contribution in contrast to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Nevertheless, Friedan was one of the first scholars to examine gender from a woman's point of view (Breines, 1992: 26). American women identified themselves with the frustration and anxiety Friedan describes in her book as "the problem without a name": tediousness, boredom and loneliness, sometimes ensuing depressions and suicidal considerations which in due course led to abuse of alcohol and drugs.

As several academics have noted, there is a link between Anne Parsons (daughter of the eminent post-war sociologist), Betty Friedan and Sylvia Plath. Growing up in the fifties, Parsons viewed herself as the "brain who nevertheless dreamed of being a cheerleader" but who later "[began] to see herself as a free thinker and mild political radical and to like that identification" (Parsons in Breines, 1992: 169). After reading the *Feminine Mystique*, Friedan received a letter from Parsons, revealing her corresponding thoughts on women of knowledge and "scapegoated" unmarried women:

Nobody needs to look at her as a person at all since it is so well known in advance that she is aggressive, competitive, rejecting of femininity and all the rest. Thus being in that category is like being a Negro or Jew- with the difference that the prejudices are manifest in such subtle ways that it is very hard to pin them down, and that the feminine mystique is so strong and attractive an ideology that it is very hard to find a countervailing point of view from which to fight for oneself (Parsons in Breines, 1992: 169).

Like Sylvia Plath and her central character in *The Bell Jar*, Parsons commenced a successful academic vocation, but later went through a mental breakdown and hospitalization,

committing suicide in 1964, a year subsequent to Plath. Similarly as Plath and her heroine, Parsons dedicated much consideration to the Post War era, the bomb, the troubles with being a solitary scholarly woman and the difficulties with accepting her femininity. Accurately expressed in her diary under the heading “Hospitalization, September 1963- June 1964”, revealing that “I got awfully scared about long John rockets and short range missiles and long range missiles and they said we had a lot more than the Russians anyway...I was an intellectual and a woman to boot, isolated and all that, so I tried the couch and he kept saying why can’t you come to terms with your basic feminine instincts...I was resisting insight into my feminine insights and who the hell could marry one of those pompous medical students anyway...”(Parsons in Breines, 1992: 183). If we were to draw some parallels between Parsons’ “diary of hospitalization” and Plath’s *Journals*, some likenesses are found. Like Parsons Plath was caught up in political, historical matters, examined in the preceding chapter, and the question of femininity: “I am at odds. I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man...I am part man, and I notice women’s breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress...Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity” (Plath, 2000: 55,77).

I take advantage of the parallels of experiences on the female body and the issue of femininity between Anne Parsons and Sylvia Plath in order to assert my thesis in this chapter: That the American mores, like the setting of *The Bell Jar*, states the manners in which women’s paths are blocked by patriarchy, forcing women to take on contradictory identifications regarding “female” morality and sexuality.

2.3 Fashioning femininity through the male gaze

As a guest editor on *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York, Esther is put off by what most girls would view as a dream come true. She can't come to identify herself with the advertisement industry. She is too intelligent and critical of this shallow world, and she questions the puritanical attitudes and the capitalist machine, symbolically noticeable when she throws all her given clothes out of her hotel window:

Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York (BJ, 107).

The text accentuates how Esther is criticising the relationship between commercialism and femininity by connecting her abandoned garments to the ashes of a person she once loved. Through the linking of clothes to the ceremonial ashes of a burial, she contends that the items were once vital to her, but not any longer. Hence, consumerism and performing femininity through fashion becomes the ultimate test of Esther's social role success and mental health (Macpherson, 1991: 6). *Mlle* is fashioning femininity through image. For women, appearance is viewed as a pre-test, whereas the real test is to obtain dates (ibid: 8). As a result one may argue that the female body becomes a commodity enjoyed for the male gaze, where the woman 'sells herself as a date-bait' (ibid). The female is always negotiating between conservative sexual values and liberal sexual behaviour. As Plath put it herself, "the American virgin is dressed to seduce" (2000: 13). In correlation to the two last statements one may choose to include some feminist viewpoints provided by Mary Ann Doane's "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema". Doane claims that there is an evident parallel between the objects displayed on a screen and female spectators' consumerism, arguing that the "female is the object of exchange rather than its subject" (Doane, 1996: 119).

She corroborates that the female is viewed as an object in order to sustain patriarchal society (ibid: 120). The notion of the woman as a commodity and the understanding of the woman as consumer, are according to Doane not completely contradictory. It may be argued whether the female is the subject or object of consumerism and to what degree the female is encouraged to actively participate in her own oppression. Therefore one may interpret the consumer as an inert subject drawn to the desirability of advertising, in other words, seduced by the image (ibid: 121), where “fashion is a means by which images of the self can be created and displayed” (Finkelstein, 1991: 130). Doane asserts that films create an obsession for commodities in its correlation with the glamorous atmosphere and the icon’s utilization of the objects. The watcher acknowledges her objectification, and more, she considers the female star as the true feminine beauty. Doane argues that the ideological effect of commercialism mirrors females’ discontentment with their lives, whereby women can never meet the beauty standards of the stars on screen (1996: 131). In relation to this, one may refer to Foucault; in his view, if one focuses too much on the film, adapting to its images and looks, one will be too busy to question its validity; this is one way women are caught within the Panopticon.

The instance of the commodity taking on power through women’s self-absorbance of the image becomes recognizable in Esther’s one month stay in New York. Through the fashion magazine, the girls are introduced to a society of appearance, where social gatherings, fashion shows and gifts in the form of clothes and accessories are a way to reach and teach femininity, not to mention that the fashion magazine, like the films referred to above, both employ commodity fetishism as a way to “teach” proper femininity. This becomes particularly evident through the character of Hilda, Esther’s colleague on the magazine, who is truly consumed by the image. She moves like a mannequin down Madison Avenue, and stares “at her reflection in the glossed shop window as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to

exist with a vacant Slavic expression” (BJ, 26, 96). In *Fantasies of Femininity*, Jane M. Ussher asserts that fashion is a commodity that transforms the female into a commodity herself. Through particular fashion traits, such as dress codes and guidelines on suitable display, the cohesive image of female beauty is established and the woman instructed (Ussher, 1997: 60). Hilda is the ultimate victim of the star’s utilization of objects on screen. After having watched a fur show, Hilda goes ahead making a copy of the neckerchief, imitating the authentic product, and thus imitating the construction of femininity. Esther, who missed the fur show, is updated on the subject by Betsy: “It was wonderful... They showed us how to make an all-purpose neckerchief out of mink tails and a gold chain, the sort of chain you can get an exact copy of at Woolworth’s for a dollar ninety-eight, and Hilda nipped down to the wholesale fur warehouses right afterwards and bought a bunch of mink tails at a big discount and dropped in at Woolworth’s and then stitched the whole thing together coming up on the bus” (BJ, 26). And sure enough, Esther observes, Hilda was wearing “an expensive-looking scarf of furry tails fastened on one side by a dangling gilt chain” (BJ, 26).

Esther’s relation to fashion is varied. Her trepidation of fashion could stem from her lack of monetary resources. Esther grew up in a middle-class home, but as her father left the family without any savings, she relied on scholarships to pay for her education. *The Bell Jar* refers to a number of papers, from women’s magazines like the *Readers Digest*, *Vogue* and *Life* to *The New Yorker*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and scandal papers. These visual representations illustrate Esther’s negotiation of alternative cultural forms (Rose, 1991: 186). As Rose phrased it: “It is hard not to see [*The Bell Jar*] as a type of pilgrim’s progress (peregrination) for girls through the multiple forms and products of twentieth-century cultural life” (ibid: 185). She further states how the wording is triggered by a “flip, sarcastic, but also suffering” tone in which the text methodically distances itself from the object being studied (ibid: 187):

These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sun-roof. Yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell...Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak...I guess one of my troubles was Doreen. I'd never known a girl like Doreen before (BJ, 4).

The two previous scenes mentioned from the novel also acknowledge that females watch each other. Men observe women, and the female observes that she is being watched, which again effects women's relations to themselves and amongst themselves as well. The male gaze frames the woman's identification of self. According to John Berger, the inspector of the woman inside her is male: "the surveyed female" (Berger, 1972: 47). The female endorses the male gaze by transmitting the objectification to herself, she becomes "an object of vision" where her main function becomes to praise him (ibid). Ussher claims that when women create a female gaze, they are creating an *asymmetry* of power across the genders (Ussher, 1997: 143).

Thus, critics have claimed that the title of Plath's novel refers to the scientific objectification of the female body: "to be placed within a bell jar, a glass enclosed, confined space for the purpose of being observed" means that the female gender is repeatedly recognized merely as objects through the male gaze and culture. More concretely, the woman is being viewed as a scientific object where the image of observation becomes a negative and dehumanizing experience (Wagner-Martin, 1992: 22). Esther considers herself to be under a stifling jar, which perverts her psyche and deprives her of the ability to form bonds with people, and hence may symbolise the individual versus society. *The Bell Jar* as an image embodies my thesis for this chapter as it illustrates the entrapment of the female body and with patriarchal

culture. One may argue that both the magazine and the man function as mirrors of femininity in *The Bell Jar*. The image captures everything, “all must be remedied for public display. Big Brother is Watching You is not the worst news for women. They have been set watching themselves in the mirrors”(Macpherson, 1991: 9). Through the dating norm, there has been established a partnership between the magazine and the date, where the date has become an arena for self-enhancement, but not the aim (ibid: 10). Instead it is the cultivated forum to encourage femininity (ibid). The magazine, the advertisement and the mirror are static images, subject for preparation, whereas the dating becomes the moving image, where one’s level of feminine competence is judged. The date is also balanced between seduction and chastity (ibid: 11). In *The Bell Jar* Esther regularly fails to distinguish herself in the mirror, witnessed in the former chapter when she fails to insinuate her own gender in the mirror. But this is also recognizable when she has been out with Doreen and Lenny and fails to identify her own reflections in the elevator doors: “I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course” (BJ, 17). Another episode of failed identification was subsequent to Esther’s electroshock treatment with Dr Nolan when she believed the reflections of herself to be another woman: “I could see the body of a woman wearing a rumpled black-and-white checked robe and flung out on a cot as if dropped from a great height” (BJ, 206). Mirrors function as a premise on Esther’s intricacy to recognize her own self. The fact that Esther does not recognize her own reflection indicates her troubles as a women placed in a society whose instructions she can not agree to nor reject (Perloff, 1972: 511).

Sandra Lee Bartky examines Foucault’s view on “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1979: 138), where individuals freely engage in self-policing to obey the rules and maintain cultural standards. She illustrates how women control their bodies and discipline themselves to match men’s

ideas of correct female appearance. Bartky argues that the construction of the female body is a result of Foucault's disciplinary power, which is institutionally bound and disciplines through explicit institutions like the school, the prison and the factory. In short, it is a result of the "essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical" systems of power, as well as institutionally "unbound" disciplines (Bartky, 2003: 36). "Unbound disciplines" means that disciplinary oppression can come about voluntarily: "The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity on the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (ibid). She argues that the female body comprises both of these emphases. In her words:

Feminine bodily discipline has this dual character: on the one hand, no one is marched off for electrolyses at gunpoint, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed by countless women in an attempt to master the rituals of beauty. Nevertheless, insofar as the disciplinary practises of femininity produce a "subjected and practised," an inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination (ibid: 37)

Other scholars like Rose Weitz have written similar analyses implying that the female depends on both disciplinary influences and confrontation: "women are neither 'docile bodies' nor free agents, but rather combine accommodation and resistance as they actively grapple with cultural expectations and social structures" (2003: 136). Accommodation in this regard implies deeds which accept subjugation, whereby resistance involves rejecting subordination "by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination" (ibid: 136). In *The Bell Jar* Esther embodies both aspects of accommodation and resistance. Esther participates in accommodation through self-policing, caused by the political and social pressures of the fifties. She has been raised to perform humbleness and gratitude, as one who

has received other's charity. As Wagner-Martin expressed it, "Esther has very little real choice in her life. She is the victim of economic and social mores" (1992: 57). During Dr. Nolan's talk therapy, she is encouraged to disclose her true feelings and thoughts; "the reason Dr. Nolan brings to Esther- and the text- the freshness of real emotion is that no one else in the novel acts on feelings" (ibid). The characteristic of resistance is found when Esther retells Dr. Nolan the story where Mrs Greenwood had bought her roses for her birthday, but Esther throws them away, informing Dr Nolan "that was a silly thing for her to do" (BJ, 195). The achievement of the deed and the retelling of the account led to Esther's declaring that she hates her mother, and thus underlines her recently developed ability of purchasing resistance. The act of resistance could be viewed in female terms by the fact that it is an outcome of the suppressive power lines, where the subversive models tend to reproduce power relations they were actually rejecting.

Bartky notes that there are remarkable gender differences between male and female, in relation to gestures, postures, movements, and common bodily behaviours. According to her, women are to a larger extent constrained than their male counterparts in their performances, actions and space (2003: 29). The newer disciplinary power where the female is "dispersed and anonymous", where the public sanctions are removed, the female body penetrates "a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (Foucault, 1979: 138). Bartky discloses that the female is the prisoner of the Panopticon as a subject performing self-policing, where this surveillance of self is a "form of obedience to patriarchy " and the "reflection in woman's consciousness of the fact that she is under surveillance in ways that he is not, that whatever else she might become, she is importantly a body designed to please or excite" (Bartky, 2003: 42). These features become conspicuously captured through Bartky's listing of "typically" female behaviour:

The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon” (ibid).

The view upon the male gaze is also revealed in Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Although a work of classical film criticism, the piece of writing may be methodically representative for art in general as it reflects the dominant view of cultural ideology, and thus supports my arguments and findings. In her article, Mulvey argues that the image of woman “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, not meaning” (1989: 15). She states that the woman is the image while the man is the bearer of the look. Whereas the male is active, the female is passive. The female is looked at and exhibited as a sexual object, first through the male’s gaze, secondly through the viewer in the audience (ibid: 19). The spectator identifies himself with the central male character that controls the events, adapting his glance that concurs with the active power of the erotic look (ibid: 20). Doane disagrees with Mulvey, as she claims that one ought to rethink the absoluteness upon the separation of the subject and the object (Doane, 1996: 120). Also, while Mulvey approaches the female’s objectification through the male gaze, Doane interprets the “female as object” as a consequence of consumerism, arguing that the spectator-consumer has increasingly been pictured as female (ibid: 123). She asserts that the removal of female subjectivity in support of female as commodity is only moderately successful as the females

are active buyers: “women’s ability to purchase, her subjectivity as a consumer, is qualified by a relation of commodities that is also ultimately subordinated to that intensification of the affective value of sexual relations that underpins a patriarchal society” (ibid: 120).

One may argue that Plath criticises Mulvey’s ‘male in control’ picture when she questions the cultural and psychological position of woman and man in society, where the male gender appears to be in the position of power, authority and sexualized control over women, which is further promoted through language. Lant argues that Plath made use of male discourses and metaphors, such as self-disclosure. As discussed in the former chapter, confession did not come to represent power and freedom for Plath’s subject as it did for the male counterparts of the Beat generation and confessional poets. Thus, Plath challenges this male power in the act of writing by relying on masculine models to make available a composition for her creative subjectivity, yet revealing this genre’s failings (Lant, 1993: 630). As Lant expressed it: “The irony of Plath’s situation is that while her own figures for creativity are drawn from masculine models, her use of such figures is deeply compromised – for both her and her readers – by the reality of her own femaleness, by her body which is a woman’s body” (ibid: 631). According to Miller Budick, Plath confronts the issue of male and female language in *The Bell Jar*, arguing that Esther’s alienation from language is a direct result of the lack of a female verbal communication in general, and hence points to a female discourse to conquer such isolation. In Budick’s words, Plath “creates a literary form that...reflects the inherent femininity of a woman’s experience and then transforms that reflection from a static, potentially suffocating presentation of archetypes or traditional images of femaleness into a dynamic process of feminist discourse” (Budick, 1987: 873). Regarding this feature, one may argue that men’s position of power is as much a question of control over language as it is of sociological or physical power (ibid).

Esther's reaction to the controlling power of male language is physical and psychical retreat. In *The Bell Jar* men occupy the field of teaching and scientific study. She portrays, almost with no exception, all male protagonists within one of three categories: the indifferent, the ridiculous or the woman hater. One may argue that some of the harm done to Esther is a consequence of unwritten laws imposed by the patriarchal society. Her date with the brutal woman-hater Marco, would very likely have been judged as self-inflicted by her community. Since Esther was not dating an appropriate candidate, she deserved her brutal treatment (Wagner-Martin, 1992: 50). Masculine power is also revealed through the language of female characters, such as Buddy Willard's mother when she announces: "'What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security,' and, 'What a man is is an arrow into the future'" where the woman ought to be "the place the arrow shoots off from" (BJ, 67). In the chapter following this pronouncement, Esther echoes Mrs Willard, claiming that she would like to be that arrow: "The last thing I wanted was infinite security... I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (BJ, 79).

2.4 Heterosexuality and repressive sexuality

In Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality" (1980) she holds that male empowerment in heterosexual relationships throughout social institutions has been violating women's psychic and physical confines on the grounds of "male needs, male fantasies about women, and male interests in controlling women- particularly in the realms of sexuality and motherhood- fused with the requirement of industrial capitalism" (Rich, 2003: 14). Rich further states that women are "a sexual prey to men" where sexuality and violence are harmonizing attributes of female desires (ibid: 20).

In her essay, Rich makes references to Kathleen Gough's listing on eight characteristics of male control in ancient and current culture which produce sexual inequality (ibid: 18). In the following subsection I will make use of Gough's list as a framework to argue how certain characters and episodes in *The Bell Jar* may be congruent with her thesis. First, she proclaims "the power of men to deny women sexuality". Although not directly addressed by the male characters, one receives the notion that sexual pureness and moderation is the prevailing aim. This bizarrely becomes apparent as Esther receives an article from the *Reader's Digest* called "The defence of Chastity" mailed to her by her mother. The article was written by a female lawyer and stated that:

The best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable (BJ, 77).

As Ussher put it: if you "look at the rules of femininity that define how girls become 'woman', taught to them by parents, teachers or through teenage magazines. The only mention of sex is 'don't'" (Ussher, 1997: 3). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is trying to negotiate the sexual politics of her time: "When I was about nineteen pureness was the greatest issue. Instead of the world being divided into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men, or even man or woman, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't" (BJ, 77).

Second on Gough's list is "the power of men to force it upon them". In *The Bell Jar* this trait matches Esther's experience with Marco, the woman hater who attempts to rape Esther after a night out, implying that she owes him sexual intercourse in view of the fact that he had given her a diamond stickpin. Marco threw Esther down into the mud. Esther escaped by smashing his nose with her fist, whereby Marco replied: "'Sluts, all sluts'. Marco seemed to be talking to himself. 'Yes or no, it is all the same'" (BJ, 105). Esther recognizes him as a woman hater as he "paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I'd happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards" (BJ, 102).

Both the 3rd and the 7th characterisation on Gough's list, holding that men have the power "to command or exploit their labor to control their produce" and "to cramp their creativeness" may be seen in correlation to Buddy's bigoted frame of mind, even when performed with the best intentions. The second statement, extended by Rich as "pogrom against independent, 'unassimilated' women, definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female within any culture...restriction of female self-fulfilment to marriage and motherhood" (Rich, 2003: 119) is documented as Buddy states to Esther that after they married she would lose interest in producing texts and lyrics, as she would become too occupied with domestic obligations and being his wife. While the former statement concerning male power in hospitals and medical procedures (as revealed in the previous chapter), where the man has the control over medical diagnoses and childbirth, is accurately portrayed through Buddy's round tour of hospital sights and Dr Gordon's shock treatment, offered without proper preparations or consultations.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, Foucault addresses the relationship between sexuality and power, principally since the 19th century. He argues that sexuality operates as a predecessor of power and is connected to the development of bio-power, which is "the

subjugation of bodies and the control of populations...embodied in institutions such as the army and the schools” (Foucault, 1984: 140). He questions the “repressive hypothesis”, a common view implying that the social order has repressed sexual desire during the two last centuries. While he describes the beginning of the 17th century as a time where “bodies made a display of themselves”, he portrays the decades to follow as “the Victorian bourgeoisie” where sexuality was locked away and put out of sight through the literal and ideological constructions of the home (ibid: 3). Foucault asserts that “the couple imposed itself as a model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy” (ibid), where the only places of subversion would be relegated to the mental hospital and brothel. Only in these institutions, according to Foucault, would people furtively manage to maintain their “pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted”, like a federation of “those other Victorians” (ibid: 4). Foucault further notes that this repressive sexuality is effortlessly upheld on political and historical grounds as it is affected by increased capitalism. Nevertheless, he proclaims that there might be an equally important motive for the affiliation between sexuality and repression, in Foucault’s own words:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power (ibid: 6).

In *The Bell Jar* purity versus sexuality is an ongoing struggle for Esther in regards to her identity and body. She has been brought up to believe that sexuality belongs to the sphere of marriage. Wini Breines argues that white, middle class girls growing up in the 1950’s took part in a severely contradictory culture: “They balanced precariously on the edge between two

cultures... this generation was inverting an emergent culture, one in which new meanings and values, new practises, new relationships and kinds of relationships were continually being created in contrast to a residual culture effectively formed in the past, but still active in the cultural process” (Raymond Williams in Breines, 1992: 88). According to Breines, young women in the fifties were victims as well as agents, where “‘post-war girls’ sexual conundrums and strategies...were historically significant, more than simply personal stories of growing up” (ibid). As we can see through Esther’s experiences with sexuality and her relationship with men, there is an inconsistent view between the established sexual values and modern sexual liberation. In *The Bell Jar*, her surroundings have warned her about giving in to temptation. Nonetheless, Esther seeks sexual knowledge, believing that it would transform her sense of self. In Esther’s own terms, “I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line” (BJ, 77). Breines points out that sexual exploration might also be an outcome of the strict feminine norms and could be interpreted as a rejection of conformity and material comfort. Boundary testing through sexuality therefore came about as an expression of freedom (Breines, 1992: 92). In the novel, Esther is devastated when she learns that Buddy has more sexual experience than herself, having acknowledged that he slept with a waitress the previous summer. Esther becomes furious as she believed that he, likewise herself, was “saving himself” for their marriage. Esther’s main worry concerning his affair is not associated with his infidelity, but the fact that he has pretended to be inexperienced: “Actually, it wasn’t the idea of Buddy sleeping with somebody that bothered me...What I couldn’t stand was Buddy’s pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he’d been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face” (BJ, 67). After discovering Buddy’s flirtation with the waitress, Esther decides to lose her virginity. She will not be a drawback to her upcoming prospect and unquestionably impure husband: “Ever since Buddy Willard had told me about that waitress I had been

thinking I ought to go out and sleep with somebody myself. Sleeping with Buddy wouldn't count, though, because he would still be one person ahead of me, it would have to be with somebody else" (BJ, 74).

In New York City, Esther goes on two blind dates. The first one is with the Russian interpreter Constantin, an acquaintance of Mrs Willard. Esther admires his virtues and decides she would let Constantin be the one to seduce her. Still, by her preference of Constantin, she reveals a motive by choosing him in specific:

Constantin seemed mature and considerate in every way. There were no people I knew he would want to brag to about it, the way college boys bragged about sleeping with girls in the backs of cars to their room-mates or their friends on the basketball team. And there would be a pleasant irony in sleeping with a man Mrs Willard had introduced me to, as if she were, in a roundabout way, to blame for it (BJ, 76).

The rendezvous with Constantin was a flop however, as he pays no attention to Esther's seductive drives. Esther's second date is with Marco. Even though she rejects his ferocious attempts of going all the way, she does consider for a split second to get it over with, "'It's happening', I thought. 'It's happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen'" (BJ, 104). Macpherson proclaims that Esther's experience of femaleness in the course of dating Marco and Constantin illustrates that the "currency of female flesh, whether given or withheld, structures men's expectations and so predetermines the morality and commerce of the date" (1991: 16). White argues that the double standards upon the female gender trap them: "I resented virginity, and the so-called 'purity' of women, and reacted violently to any suggestion about it. It had always shamed me that men judged women by such a standard" (in Macpherson, 1991: 16). This emphasis becomes particularly vital through the traits of Eric, "a

bitter, hawk-nosed Southerner from Yale” (BJ, 74). Esther discusses the possibilities of going to bed with him, however realizing that it would never take place as Eric is of the opinion that he would never go to bed with a woman he loved: “If he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He’d go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business”(BJ, 74-75). In relation to Foucault’s “Other Victorians”, Eric represents an extreme scenario, implying that if he is to encompass sexuality, he prefers a prostitute where he would be in a separate space, unchained from conservative morality. Further on Esther reveals that “he thought it disgusting the way all the girls at [Esther’s] college stood around on the porches under the porch lights and in the bushes in plain view, necking madly before the one o’clock curfew, so everybody passing by could see them. A million years of evolution, Eric said bitterly, and what are we, animals?” (ibid). His belief was the standard for many middle class people who feared the possibility of girls “going all the way or worse, of appearing to have” (Breines, 1992: 8). In the end of the novel, Esther does experience sex with the “well-paid professor”. It occurs as she has been warned about; not satisfying, leading to her haemorrhage: “I lay rapt up and naked, on Irwin’s blanket, waiting for the miraculous change to make itself felt. But all I felt was a sharp startling bad pain, ‘It hurts’, I said. ‘Is it supposed to hurt?’”(BJ, 218). Erwin does not appear to be troubled by Esther’s wound as he enters the bathroom and takes a shower. Esther leaves him shortly afterwards, still haemorrhaging when she enters the hospital’s emergency room.

As stated previously, Plath employs masculine metaphors of disclosure, in which the physical experience of self-disclosure differs for the female and the male (Lant, 1993: 626). As Lant expressed it: while the “unclothed male body is-in terms of the dominant figurative systems of Western discourse-powerful in that it is sexually potent, sexually armed; the naked female body is again, in terms of the figurative systems which dominate this period-vulnerable in that

it is sexually accessible, susceptible to penetration, exploitation, rape, pregnancy”(ibid). While nudity indicated rebirth and the recovery of identity for the Beats (ibid: 261), it had the contrary effect on Esther, linking her nakedness with suffering. Obstacles Plath witnessed as a writer then, are clashes between her experiences as a female and her wish to situate those experiences through the (male) discourses accessible to her (ibid: 630). In relation to Foucault, Esther’s “rapt up and naked” condition questions the discourses on sexuality as a way of purchasing social control. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault emphasises to reveal how the discourses on sexuality have come about through societal institutions and hence self-policing. Through the act of observation, we control the actions of both ourselves and of others in order to create a healthy sexuality.

A study of the heroine’s sexual desires is debatably observed in the famous opening: “It was a queer and sultry summer...” (BJ: 1). The terms “queer” and “sultry” may refer to *The Bell Jar*’s fictional form. If it is interpreted as a bildungsroman, it tells the story of Esther’s experiences of fifties America and her development and construction of sexual and social identity. Her relational developments may refer to the terms queer and sultry, seeing that sultry may be interpreted as an off-putting term, indicating an airless and oppressive location. Or it could be examined as a seductive summer as the word sultry connotes something sexy, implying a female wearing her sexuality in a somewhat ostentatious manner. Queer may involve a feeling of oddity and curiousness. Thus, it may refer to “a person with mild insanity or who exhibits socially inappropriate behavior” (wikipedia.org). In correlation to the latter statement, one may interpret the opening idiom of *The Bell Jar* as a rhetorical expression for Esther’s later madness. It could also be argued that the word queer has multiple meanings, as queer may refer to Esther’s sexual identification, or simply a strange summer, or conceivably both. Judith Butler (among others) defines queer in relation to homosexual identity, arguing

that queer may be seen as the “oppressor’s version of the identity of the oppressed” (Butler, 1999: 156). In *The Bell Jar* Esther distinguishes very clearly between sexualities: the heterosexual relationship which proves to be difficult to obtain, and homosexuality, experienced in the asylum where Joan Giddings makes a pass at her, which Esther rejects. Even so, Esther admits her curiosity about Joan’s persona:

I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own (BJ, 209-210).

Interestingly, homosexuality had a central position in peoples’ anxieties around Communism, as it bonded the two categories to a “defenceless” population (Breines, 1992: 8). Many scholars, including Elaine Tyler May and Wini Breines, have argued on behalf of the parallel between sexual chaos and the atom bomb: “The political and sexual repression, the red scare, and the feminine mystique were often connected to the public mind. Fears of Communism and female sexuality melded, leading to a policy of containment for both” (Breines, 1992: 10).

Esther gives the reader the impression of holding radical viewpoints, criticising the politics of containment in regards to gender identity and politics. Yet, her encounter with lesbianism is experienced as a threat: “Lesbianism threatens the whole project of female adolescence: to secure gender identity irreversibly, by heterosexual initiation into womanhood” (Macpherson, 1991: 81). May points out that “normal” heterosexual behaviour culminating in marriage represented “maturity” and “responsibility;” therefore, those who were “deviant” were, by definition, irresponsible, immature, and weak in the post-war era (1988: 94). This view is also

revealed as late as in 1987 through the *Bell Jar* film trial, where Jane Anderson goes to court, arguing that she is portrayed as Plath's lesbian character, Joan, arguing for justifications as a consequence of "defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional damage", along with the argument that "she was not and had never been a homosexual" (Rose, 1991: 107). Macpherson notes that Joan is viewed as a threat to Esther as she represents the "third sex" and an alternative choice to celibacy or heterosexual subversion, as well as women's customary identity as heterosexuals, by triggering homophobia (1991: 83-84):

'I like you,' Joan was saying...And as she stretched out on my bed with a silly smile...'That's tough, Joan,' I said... 'Because I don't like you. You make me puke if you want to know' And I walked out of the room, leaving Joan lying, lumpy as an old horse, across my bed (BJ, 211).

The previous evening's interview with Dr. Nolan, Esther confesses that she "doesn't see what women see in other women, what does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in another man? Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, 'Tenderness.' That shut me up" (BJ, 210).

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault announces that there is a relationship between sexuality, power and discourse. He criticises the "juridico-political discourse", a notion arguing that power only provides limitations and subordinations (Foucault, 1984: 87-88). He alleges instead that power is linked both to oppression and productiveness. As mentioned previously, the "bio-power" provides two different poles of power. First, the "politics of the human body" views the body as a machine, embodied in civic institutions like the army and school (ibid: 140). One could allege that the methodically constructed Panopticon, as discussed more comprehensively in the previous chapter, is an example of the discipline of the body. The second pole, the "politics of the population", emphasises the biological processes like

“propagation, births and mortality” (ibid: 139). Foucault claims that the conception of sexuality became central with the development of bio-power. He argues that there are four diverse operations in which sexuality was spread; through the sexuality of children, couples, the female body and the perverse (ibid: 104-105). If we were to link this complex structure of sexuality and power to *The Bell Jar*, Esther fits into the “hysterization of the women’s bodies”, which involved “a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” (ibid: 147). Foucault’s account encompasses the 1950’s in general with regards to sexual control, domestic marriage and oppressive gender roles, as it analytically portrays the containment ideology through its focus on the “body” and the “population”, where in his words, “sex became a crucial target of a power organized around the management of life” (ibid). To facilitate power and influence in the fifties, one needed to pursue its standards through adequate sexual interaction. As Kinsey acknowledges, sex belonged to marriage, whereas premarital sex could bring about culpability and stigmas: a “behaviour which is accepted by the culture does not generate psychologic conflicts in the individual or unmanageable social problems”, yet, in a subsequent culture it “may generate guilt and neurotic disturbances in the nonconforming individual and serious conflict with the social organism” (in May, 1988: 123). In *The Bell Jar* this is witnessed through Esther’s geographical adaptability of the contradictive cultures of Manhattan and the suburbia life. During Esther’s stay in New York City, her pureness is at stake. Accompanied by Doreen, she learns the harsh realities of the American virgin dating norm, where its effect in terms of neurotic disturbances leads to her social alienation in the conformist suburbs.

2.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has focused on the relationship between femininity, sexuality and heterosexuality through the main protagonist in *The Bell Jar*. It depicts Esther's relationship with herself, where self-policing is a frequent element of her "surveyed self". I showed how self-policing can operate in relation to body image and sexuality through idioms of "the fashioned self" and Esther's confrontations with sexual orientation in *The Bell Jar*. While in the first chapter I portrayed Esther's psychic health, influenced by the ideology of containment, this chapter links Esther's identity process with that of the broader organizations of patriarchal power within American society. Through feminist scholars such as Doane, Mulvey and Bartky, I have examined how self awareness exhibited through the male gaze leads to self surveillance and "docile bodies". Secondly, I have included Rich's "Compulsory heterosexuality" and Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* in an effort to reveal the linkage between sexuality and power as observed in Esther's conflicting relationship to the opposite sex.

Conclusion

In order to review my findings, I want to reiterate Foucault's understanding of the Panopticon as it is the symbol of his whole argument regarding the structure of power, and is the main symbol for my analysis of *The Bell Jar*. Foucault's theory on the disciplinary society is functional, as it reveals how a society is anchored in examination and observation. The Panopticon persists through state controls, where its methods of oppression are operational throughout society. In my study I have aimed to juxtapose two forms of Panopticism in association with Esther's female identity. First, through Esther's relationship to Cold War ideology, which is concretely recognised through her imaginative identification with Ethel Rosenberg, and especially through the link between the Rosenbergs executions and her experiences with electroshock treatment. I have asserted that these historical aspects of fifties America, together with its emphasis on conventional values, affected Esther's mental health through the imposition of self-policing. By including a comparative analysis of Ethel Rosenberg and Esther Greenwood, I have endeavoured to reinforce central themes which are to be found in *The Bell Jar*, looking at how the McCarthy era implemented questionable approaches to secure its nation, and culminating in Ethel Rosenberg's execution for her refusal to both behave like a victim and in her refusal to separate political activism and maternity. Esther Greenwood may have interpreted Ethel Rosenberg's destiny as a reflection on her own restricted choices, as observed through the image of the fig tree and carried out through the dybbuk segment.

Esther's "madness" was hence linked to the cultural and political landscape of America in the fifties. America in the fifties was a society in which its anxiety in the post-war era led to the imposition of conventional values and an emphasis on stability through the promotion of

early marriage, the dream of suburban domesticity, and the fiction of family togetherness, which in turn led to a society of order in which suburbia participated as a significant allegorical image of the “correct” society. As revealed, being at home instigates Esther’s mental illness. Thus the bell jar functions as a metaphor of suburban conformity in its form of entrapment and death. Esther’s preoccupation with death and enclosed spaces may therefore be linked to Esther’s statement in the opening lines of the novel: “I knew something was wrong with me that summer because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs” (BJ, 2).

I portrayed how *The Bell Jar* confronts society’s norms, which in turn portrays the roles of women in the 1950’s. Through my analysis I have argued how this novel reveals how women latched on to their domestic obligations, but more crucially, the price they paid for doing it. Their maintenance of domesticity was construed through Foucault’s understanding of self-policing, whereas their cost in forms of mental health and isolation was an unwavering result of the Panopticon itself. Furthermore, I have claimed that the mental illness of many women, including Esther, were directly linked to the containment ideology, arguing that there was a linkage between the fear of Communist subversion and sexual expression, leading to a fear of gender anxiety, which in turn affected women in particular through its bizarre surveillance system, stressing female domesticity. I discussed how the surveillance system of the Panopticon was extended to also include the private realm of the home in addition to one’s body through the medical profession and the asylum. According to Foucault, privacy does not exist as it is already infiltrated by power. Even if contemporary societies emphasize ideas on liberty and rights, they cannot escape the mechanisms that also control the individual through institutions, exemplified through the asylum in *The Bell Jar*, which tries to steer the patients towards the norm.

I have emphasised how Esther's female identity is also an outcome of the relationship between Esther's feminine and sexual realizations. Through my discussion on fashioning femininity through the male gaze, I have emphasised a feminist theory approach, which is suitable for my argument as it portrays how the female body is objectified by the male gaze. In particular, I have aimed to illustrate how Doane's "The economy of Desire" argues how the female is "the object of exchange rather than its subject". Esther appears to have mixed feelings towards the commodity-femininity relationship, as observed through the scene in which Esther throw her clothes away and the scene where she acknowledges that "these girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sun-roof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans...Girls like that makes me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak" (BJ, 4). Thus, the female does not only encompass self-policing through the male gaze, but women also survey each other, creating an asymmetry of power through the female gaze. Through Foucault's notion of "docile bodies", it becomes apparent that women perform self-policing in order to follow cultural principles. Mulvey puts forth many of the same arguments as Doane, but asserts that the female is the image while the man is the bearer of the look. She questions "how to fight the unconscious structured like a language while still caught within the language of the patriarchy"(Mulvey, 1989:15). I have argued that Plath challenges male power in the act of writing, and hence Mulvey's theory on male superiority, by choosing to write in male discourse herself, and challenging this discourse by doing so. In order to debate Esther's relationship to men, I looked at Rich's notions on the characteristics that produce inequality between the sexes, linking it to Esther's experiences to men through the characters of Marco, Constantin and Buddy. By employing Foucault's theory on the relationship between sexuality, power and discourse, I linked the "repressive hypothesis" in connection to Esther's conflicting view on sexuality; while the conservative forces stressed the value of purity, others stressed the importance of sexual exploration. In my thesis I have

argued that boundary testing in the form of sexual engagement came about as a quest for freedom and rejection of conformity, and hence an effort to claim autonomy and power.

Finally, I would propose some suggestions for further research. As observed through my thesis there are several episodes in *The Bell Jar* which are also reflected upon in Plath's *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Even though Plath is regarded as a confessional writer, it is obvious that *The Bell Jar* is not biographical, but that she draws on characters, episodes and political opinions from her *Journals* and society at large in order to put forward her statements. If I had included her *Journals* as my second primary source, I would give a more comprehensive and in-depth examination of the link between Sylvia Plath's and Esther Greenwood's mental health, and their negotiation of the 1950's era. Additionally, if I were to give a more inclusive synopsis of the period in question and simultaneously offer a comparison with another author's work, I would include *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. In his play he metaphorically criticises the McCarty era, comparing it to the witch-hunt in Salem during the 17th century. According to Miller himself, he wrote the play in order to "define what a human being should be, how he can survive in today's society without having to be a different person from what he basically is" (Kielland-Lund, 2005). The statement equally portrays Esther's grounds for falling apart in the Cold War era, in the form of alienation from society in response to the public and private conundrums of fifties America.

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